

# “Promissory” naturalism - comments on moral sources

Naturalizm „zadłużony”: uwagi dotyczące źródeł  
moralnych

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## Abstract:

The term ‘promissory’ naturalism was borrowed from Karl Raymond Popper, who used a similar term in relation to materialism in one of his criticisms of this stance<sup>[1]</sup>. The subject of my reflections is the contemporary version of materialism – reductionist naturalism in relation to morality which I call naturalism for simplicity<sup>[2]</sup>. With the use of the term ‘promissory’, I understand that the naturalistic concept of morality is the heir to ethical doctrines which it does not acknowledge, because it remains in an open opposition in relation to them, and it is built on this opposition. In other words, the naturalistic concept of morality contains hidden moral sources which naturalism itself can neither articulate nor derive from its assumptions. I will point out that the paradoxicality of reductionist naturalism in the matter of morality lies in the fact that it is a self-refuting doctrine.

## Keywords:

naturalism, reductionism, materialism, utilitarianism, evolutionary psychology

## Streszczenie:

Określenie naturalizm „zadłużony” zapożyczyłam od Karla Rajmunda Poppera, który użył podobnego terminu w odniesieniu do materializmu w jed-

<sup>1</sup>Popper, K. R., Eccles, J. (1977) *The Self and Its Brain*, Springer, Berlin, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>Reductionist naturalism, similarly to materialism, assumes the existence of only what can be researched in a scientific way, and reduces all spiritual and cultural phenomena (including morality, law, art) to the physical world. On the different varieties of naturalism, see: Flanagan, O. (2006) *Varieties of naturalism*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, eds. Clayton, Ph., Simpson, Z., Oxford University Press, p. 430–452.

nej ze swoich krytyk tego stanowiska<sup>[3]</sup>. Przedmiotem moich rozważań jest współczesna wersja materializmu – redukcjonistyczny naturalizm w odniesieniu do moralności, który dalej dla uproszczenia nazywam po prostu naturalizmem<sup>[4]</sup>. Przez „zadłużenie” naturalizmu rozumiem zaś to, że naturalistyczna koncepcja moralności jest spadkobierczynią doktryn etycznych, do których się nie przyznaje, ponieważ pozostaje w stosunku do nich w otwartej opozycji i na tej opozycji jest zbudowana. Innymi słowy, naturalistyczna koncepcja moralności zawiera w sobie ukryte źródła moralne, których sam naturalizm nie potrafi ani wyartykułować, ani wyprowadzić ze swoich założeń. Zwrócę uwagę, że paradoksalność redukcjonistycznego naturalizmu w kwestii moralności polega na tym, że jest to doktryna samoobalająca.

### Słowa kluczowe:

naturalizm, redukcjonizm, materializm, utylitaryzm, psychologia ewolucyjna

<sup>3</sup>Popper, K. R., Eccles, J. (1977) *The Self and Its Brain*, Springer, Berlin, p. 96. Popper uses the term promissory materialism therein.

<sup>4</sup>Reductionist naturalism, similarly to materialism, assumes the existence of only what can be researched in a scientific way, and reduces all spiritual and cultural phenomena (including morality, law, art) to the physical world. On the different varieties of naturalism, see: Flanagan, O. (2006) *Varieties of naturalism*, in: Clayton, Ph., Simpson, Z. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, Oxford University Press, p. 430–452.

## Evolutionary sources of morality

Nowadays, there is a lot of research on morality in sociobiology, game theory, experimental economics, evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, etc.<sup>[1]</sup>. These studies are intended to better understand what morality is and how it could have been developed. The main subject of this research is to analyze

the phenomenon of altruism and cooperation which the authors of these studies consider as the core of morality. The method of this research is usually a regression analysis, i.e., a statistical method that serves to predict the unknown value of a variable (property) based on known values of the variable and function that illustrates their relationship (correlation)<sup>[2]</sup>. The research consists in comparing different groups in terms of data and an attempt to show the coexistence of phenomena, for example the correlation between innate predispositions to altruistic behaviors and cooperative behavior which is perceived as moral. Research on altruism is often conducted comparably in people, in particular children in the early stag-

<sup>1</sup>Churchland, P. (2012) *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality*. Princeton University Press, Princeton; de Waal, F. (2016) *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*. Princeton University Press, Princeton; Joyce, R. (2007) *The Evolution of Morality*, Bradford Book; Katz, L. D. (2000) *Evolutionary Origins of Morality*, Imprint Academic; Dunbar, R. (2013) *Nowa historia ewolucji człowieka*, Kraków; Tomasello, M. (2009) *Why We Cooperate*, The MIT Press, Boston.

<sup>2</sup>Kucharzyk, B. Wstęp, in: R. Dunbar, *Nowa historia...*

es of development (up to the third year of life) which would exclude the explanation of certain behaviors by the influence of socialization. This research is also conducted on close relatives of people – chimps, in order to extract typically human features associated with altruistic behavior considered by researchers as moral. It should be emphasized that this type of study does not explain the causal relationship between phenomena, but only shows a positive or negative correlation of phenomena which is subject to interpretations. There is always the possibility that despite a strong positive correlation of certain phenomena, their co-occurrence is accidental, because there may be some unremarkable third factor that explains the appearance of both phenomena independently of each other.

The research hypothesis is based on the fact that the inclination to altruism, or the willingness to bear one's own costs for the benefit of others, is innate and that it is the basis for

masello, thanks to intentionality (awareness of own and other people's beliefs) which can assume a multi-level structure, and also be shared with others<sup>[3]</sup>. Shared intentionality enables people to share common intentions and goals while maintaining individual roles. Thanks to it, it is possible to create group rationality and common identity which is connected with the fact that we understand ourselves through interactions with others and through our group affiliation. It also enables the development of social norms and institutions. Intentionality is crucial to morality indeed – it allows to distance to oneself and to one's interests enabling an unbiased view (the so-called view from nowhere which Thomas Nagel wrote about)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Most of the researchers from the above-mentioned fields present a naturalistic stance in morality, recognizing that the moral sense is a brain function similar to three-dimensional vision – a set of neuron circuits shaped by natural selection so that it can perform a spe-

Morality on naturalistic grounds is understood in a functionalist way; its cultivation was intended to serve species functions – survival and gene transfer which required cooperation.

behaviors considered to be moral. Morality in these considerations is reduced mainly to cooperative abilities which would not be possible without altruistic tendencies. Altruistic tendencies and cooperation were also observed in other animal species, but advanced forms of cooperation and specific forms of altruism characteristic only for humans are possible, according to researchers such as Michael To-

cific task<sup>[5]</sup>. Morality on naturalistic grounds is

<sup>3</sup>Tomasello, M. *Why We Cooperate...*; Dunbar, R. *Nowa historia...*, p. 65 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Nagel, T. (1989) *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. On the subject of intentionality in ethics, see also Spaemann, R. (2001) *Osoby. O różnicy między czymś a kimś*, Warszawa, p. 61–76.

<sup>5</sup>Pinker, S. (2003) *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human*

understood in a functionalist way; its cultivation was intended to serve species functions – survival and gene transfer which required cooperation. Morality is possible thanks to a set of adaptations that allow selfish individuals to benefit from cooperation. These adaptations are understood as psychological skills and dispositions that promote collaboration and group success. They are implemented in our brains mainly as emotional reactions which cause that we value the interests of some other individuals and expect the same from them<sup>[6]</sup>. From the point of view of the aforementioned studies, man has an altruistic and cooperative nature, and acquires selfish tendencies as a result of experience and interaction with others<sup>[7]</sup>. It can be said that contemporary research is a greater confirmation to Rousseau’s hypothesis that man is ‘a noble savage’, while denying Hobbes’ hypothesis that ‘a man is a wolf to another man’.

## The moral structure of the mind

The statement based on the observations of the existence of inborn mechanisms by which people are capable of altruism, cooperation or rule-following in their lives, in no way determines the content of morality. According to representatives of the naturalistic conception of morality, however, it is possible to consider which ethical doctrines are most compatible with the naturalistic assumptions. This type of venture is undertaken by many contemporary researchers, mainly evolutionary psy-

chologists and cognitive scientists dealing with morality. Interestingly, most researchers, independently and in different ways, come to the same conclusion that utilitarianism is the ethical doctrine most consistent with the assumptions of naturalism. Using one of the most transparent arguments on the subject, presented in the book by Joshua Greene entitled *Moral tribes*,<sup>[8]</sup> I will present how one can come to these conclusions. Furthermore, I will then consider why utilitarianism seems to be consistent with naturalism.

Referring to contemporary research of cognitive scientists, psychologists and neurobiologists, Greene in his understanding of moral thinking, uses a distinction between two cognitive systems: automatic and reflective<sup>[9]</sup>. On this basis, he creates a model of a dual-process moral brain which covers both intuitive and rational morality. Reasoning generates rational morality which is conscious, abstract, and flexible, but at the same time requires a lot of mental effort which makes it expensive and much slower. Automatic emotional reactions (automatic settings) give rise to intuitive morality which guides us in an efficient (it costs relatively little energy), fast, associative, unconscious, emotional and inflexible way. Just as we use the native language in an automatic way and just like we reflexively dodge a punch or shiver at the sight of a mouse, we can also, without giving it any thought, try to save the necessitous, feel reluctant towards incest or shudder and cover our eyes at the suf-

Nature, Penguin.

<sup>[6]</sup>Haidt, J. (2013) *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Vintage, New York.

<sup>[7]</sup>Tomasello, M. *Why We Cooperate...*

<sup>[8]</sup>Greene, J. (2013) *Moral tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them*, New York.

<sup>[9]</sup>Kahneman, D. (2012) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Penguin; Thaler, R. H., Sunstein, C. R. (2009) *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, Penguin Books; Haidt, J. (2001) *The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment*, *Psychological Review*, vol. 108, no. 4, p. 814–834.

fering inflicted on others (even when it is purely fictitious, e.g., when watching a fictional film). In the author’s opinion, intuitive morality was shaped partly by genes and partly by culture and education. Biological information has been recorded in the genotype and contains the experience of ancestors, passed on to descendants in accordance with the mechanism of natural selection. Education, on the other hand, is a collection of information based on our own experience, an established method of trial and error, along with cultural heritage, containing experience of the so-called significant others<sup>[10]</sup> – that is, people who are close to us, who we admire and imitate.

By comparing the human brain to an airplane, one can say that moral judgment based on emotional reaction (automatic settings) is like flying on an autopilot mode, and using reasoning in moral judgments is like flying on a manual mode. Undoubtedly, both sorts of settings are needed for proper functioning in the world. Automatic settings include not only emotional reactions but also our habits. In relatively simple and repetitive situations, in less complicated daily choices, the autopilot system is optimal. If we had to deliberate about making every decision every day, from choosing the right path to work, through choosing the coffee we want to drink, up to choosing the manner and form of work – we would be completely paralyzed by the excess of necessary decisions and exhausted with considering all possible options. Our habits that make up our lifestyle prevent us from such an uncomfortable situation. The complex system of signs, symbols and standards that we use in social life, so that we do not have to think about who has to do what and when, serves a similar purpose. Thanks to

this system, we avoid conflicts and coordinate our activities – we know who to let pass at the intersection to avoid an accident, and where to throw away trash (and even what rubbish to put into which container). The same applies to the skills that we gain, often as a result of effort and deliberation, and, over time, transform them into habits and automatisms, thanks to which we save a lot of energy. An experienced driver does not have to think about changing gears or activating appropriate signaling, just as a good dancer or a good sportsman perform their activities completely smoothly (or ‘naturally’, as it is often called), not requiring reflection on particular, learned movements. In other words, both modes of the brain should co-operate and support each other – reasoning should shape the automatic settings and constantly correct them in order to avoid cognitive errors, and the automatic settings should relieve the reflective system in everyday work. As it is pointed out mainly by researchers in the field of psychology and behavioral economics, the automatic settings are based on heuristics (mental abbreviations) that are extremely susceptible to cognitive biases<sup>[11]</sup>.

If these two cognitive modes of the brain are also applicable in moral thinking, as Greene points out, then undoubtedly intuitive morality is also susceptible to similar irrational errors which in this context are most often referred to as prejudice. According to Greene, intuitive morality is the optimal solution in everyday, normal circumstances in which it works without any problems. However, in unknown and

<sup>10</sup>The term ‘significant others’ comes from Georg Herbert Mead.

<sup>11</sup>These errors have their sources in the heuristics of anchoring, adaptation, availability, representativeness, priming, status quo tendencies, framing, herding (conformism), the quest for immediate gratuities etc., which is discussed in detail in the aforementioned works by Kahneman, Thaler, Sunstein: Kahneman, D. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*...; Thaler, R. H., Sunstein, C. R. *Nudge*...

changing situations, as well as complicated and complex social problems, our autopilot fails and then it becomes necessary to switch to manual mode of the brain – rational morality, based on abstract principles. Automatic settings are used to control most of our behaviors, and manual mode allows overcoming habits and automatisms when the need arises. It is worth paying attention to what the author describes as intuitive morality. In reference to the evolutionary sources of morality, the author recognizes intuitive morality as a biological adaptation whose primary function was to guarantee the best adaptation and survival of the species which was achieved through altruistic tendencies and the ability to cooperate. This evolutionary adaptation which we inherited from our ancestors, can be, as the author emphasizes, used for vari-

kin selection and reciprocal altruism). It is assumed that by natural selection, individuals cooperating within the group were selected for procreation, thanks to which the genes of cooperation were passed to subsequent generations. At the same time, due to the scarcity of goods in the world and the need to compete for goods, natural selection promoted inter-group competition. Thus, the universal scope of altruism and cooperation is inconsistent with the principles of evolution and natural selection. For these reasons, our innate tendency to cooperate allows us to put our group's interests above self-interest, as well as above the interests of other groups and their members. This latter tendency is now referred to as tribalism and has pejorative connotations. It involves loyalty to the group to which one belongs, and at the same time assigning a prior-

It seems that evolutionary psychology does not say anything about morality itself, but rather about adaptive mechanisms that allow both morality and its total opposite.

ous purposes, not necessarily consistent with its evolutionary function.

Moreover, according to Greene, intuitive morality developed by evolution, modified through education and socialization, is on the one hand a solution to many moral conflicts, but on the other hand, it creates moral conflicts itself. The reason for this ambiguous role of intuitive morality is that people have been programmed by evolution to cooperate in relatively small groups, based on personal relationships and direct contact; innate altruism with a limited scope served this purpose (one usually names

ity to one's own group over other groups and their members. It may also involve an attitude of hostility toward strangers. Evolutionary morality is therefore able to resolve intra-group conflicts ("Me versus Us"), but at the same time generates intergroup conflicts ("We versus Them"). Intra-group conflicts mainly consist in conflicts between individualism and collectivism which is the result of cooperation which requires individual self-sacrifice. Rarely do we deal with strict convergence of individual good with common good (an example of such convergence can be two people rowing, when individual interest in reaching the shore is as

the same the common interest). The morality of intra-group cooperation is intuitive, automatic and based on emotions. Nonaggression (in relation to “those of one’s kind”) is also a form of such cooperation. As for the conflicts on the second level – they are more difficult to solve because intuition is directed by group egoism, and its overcoming requires an effort of reflection. Group egoism is so deeply rooted in us that it can also influence our interpretation of facts and the perception of the world (this leads to the phenomenon of the so-called justice bias). As Greene writes, each of us looks at the world through the moral lens of group practices, customs and values.

Due to the contemporary problems of global threats: overpopulation, ecological threats, armed conflicts – the basic problem of morality is finding a way to extend the scope of cooperation over our group and overcome the ‘We versus Them’ opposition. Intuitive morality is not adapted to the requirements of the modern world in which we operate, where cooperation requires a complicated system of division of labor, takes place in huge, multimillion groups, as well as at the intergroup level<sup>[12]</sup>. For these reasons, to overcome tribalism and solve complicated global problems, it is necessary to refer to rational morality. The solution of moral conflicts through reflection should take place, according to Greene, based on utilitarian reasoning, because it assumes a common moral currency (common

moral language) which is the principle of maximizing utility (happiness). It is based on simple, difficult to refute, in the author’s opinion, assumptions: no one wants to suffer; everyone wants to be happy. These assumptions lead utilitarians to accept the golden rule: your happiness and your suffering have neither greater nor lesser significance than the happiness and suffering of anyone else (the fundamental principle of impartiality). Without going into the discussion about the already repeatedly criticized assumptions and conclusions of utilitarianism as an ethical theory,<sup>[13]</sup> I will focus only on the attempt to answer why for so many authors, utilitarianism seems to be the theory best suited to naturalism and whether it is really justified.

## The vicious circle of naturalism

Greene admits in his book that he was fascinated with utilitarianism from his early youth, and the knowledge which he gained later in the field of evolutionary psychology reassured him in his beliefs, providing arguments for accepting utilitarianism as the best existing metaethics. At the same time, the author is aware that we cannot draw any normative conclusions about how to act from a purely descriptive theory of evolution. The evolutionary imperative of the most effective gene transfer cannot be equated with morality. The knowledge that our genes endeavor to survive does not imply that we should do everything to make it easier for them. From an evolution-

<sup>12</sup>As Dietrich Birnbacher points out, biological evolution is an extremely slow process, and our current biological equipment has developed in the Stone Age and may not be fully adequate to the conditions in which man currently functions. Therefore, the cultural evolution of man (including technology and medicine) tries to make up for the shortcomings of biological evolution (Birnbacher, D. (2008) Posthumanity, Transhumanism and Human Nature, in: Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity, eds. Gordijn, G., Chadwick, R., Springer, Berlin, p. 95–106).

<sup>13</sup>See, among others: Kymlicka, W. (2002) *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford; Williams, B., Smart, J. J. C. (1973) *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Williams, B., Sen, A. (1982) *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

any point of view, such phenomena as rape, violence, and even mass extermination can be completely understood as strategies for reproductive success and the survival of our genes at the expense of other genes. From a moral point of view, such strategies are considered unacceptable. It seems that evolutionary psychology does not say anything about morality itself, but rather about adaptive mechanisms that allow both morality and its total opposite<sup>[14]</sup>.

Let us note that Greene, presenting a model of the dual-process moral brain, does not give an answer to the question of how and why we switch from autopilot to manual mode. He only says that we have this opportunity to overcome prejudices resulting from intuitive morality and deal with completely new or complicated conflicts. However, it is not difficult to imagine the case of a person who does not feel any internal conflicts caused by pursuing their interest and the interest of their own group even if it is at the expense of other groups and their members (Greene’s book contains many examples of this type of attitudes). Greene’s theory does not explain to us what might motivate such a person to switch from an automatic system to a rational system, unless we first assume that this person is, like the author, a utilitarian.

If one were to accept reductionist naturalism on the basis of morality with all consequence, then one should recognize that individual theories, including ethical theories which people accept, are only a certain rationalization of

their own emotional reactions. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman compared various theories explaining the moral stance adopted by us regarding the famous trolley problem to confabulation of a hypnotized person<sup>[15]</sup>. When a hypnotized person receives an order from a hypnotist to open a window and is awakened from hypnosis at the time of this action, they can give a lot of imaginary reasons to the question of why they are doing this without actually knowing the true cause; for instance, this person will say that they are opening the window because they felt it was too hot. According to many psychologists, people often do not understand why they do something or why they believe in something because they are caused by subconscious factors which constitute specific adaptations<sup>[16]</sup>. In such situations people do not have privileged access to themselves but when asked to explain their actions or views, they always give various explanations which they sincerely believe, although they turn out to be mere confabulations. According to Kahneman, philosophers act in the same way, trying to justify their moral beliefs or choices, not knowing that they are adaptations, independent of the adopted *ex post* reasoning.

The famous sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson drew attention to this problem, writing:

“Like everyone else, philosophers measure their personal emotional responses to vari-

<sup>14</sup>It is this awareness that shows us the significance of the moral horizon openly rejected but implicitly assumed by naturalistic conceptions of morality, as Charles Taylor points out Taylor, Ch. (2001) *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 333-334.

<sup>15</sup>Kahneman, D. (2009) chapter 3, in: Voorhoeve, A., *Conversations on Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. Criticism of this stance: Kamm, F. M. (2013) *Methodology*, in: Kamm, F. M. *Bioethical Prescriptions. To Create, End, Choose, and Improve Lives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 577–584.

<sup>16</sup>Wilson, T. (2005) *Strangers to Ourselves*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.



ous alternatives as though consulting a hidden oracle. The oracle resides in the deep emotional centers of the brain, [...] a complex array of neurons and hormone-secreting cells [...]. Human emotional responses and the more general ethical practices based on them have been programmed to a substantial degree by natural selection over thousands of generations. The challenge to science is to measure the tightness of the constraints caused by the programming, to find their source in the brain, and to decode their significance through the reconstruction of the evolutionary history of the minds<sup>[17]</sup>.

It can therefore be said that the acceptance by Greene or other evolutionary psychologists of utilitarianism is only an answer to their own emotional response to the problems and conflicts related to cooperation and rivalry discussed by them. From the point of view of the theory of evolution, there is no reason why other people, having different emotional reactions from these authors should adopt a utilitarian theory. The science dealing with evolutionary brain reconstruction can explain to us what mechanisms trigger our motives, but it cannot tell us anything, as Wilson observes, about what motives we should indulge in, and what should we suppress or sublimate. At the center of this dilemma, there is a vicious circle to which he draws attention:

“[...] we are forced to choose among the elements of human nature by reference to value systems which these same elements created in an evolutionary age now long vanished<sup>[18]</sup>”.

Overcoming this vicious circle is not possible without referring to the a priori moral values that will be considered the standards of judgment of our evolutionary tendencies and desires, and not their result. All representatives of naturalistic conceptions of morality do so, although not everyone admits it, because the naturalistic conception aspires to a scientific and purely descriptive theory. The criteria that naturalists take are, for example, the fundamental principle of impartiality, the greatest happiness principle or the principle of survival. At the same time, these criteria are not accidentally assumptions of utilitarianism, an ethical doctrine which evolved from the same intellectual sources as naturalism itself. Wilson recognizes, just like Greene, the ideal of impartiality as a cardinal value that allows overcoming the blind process of evolution:

“Because natural selection has acted on to the behavior of individuals who benefit themselves and their immediate relatives, human nature bends us to the imperatives of selfishness and tribalism. But a more detached view of the long-range course of evolution should allow us to see beyond the blind decision-making process of natural selection and to envision the history and future of our own genes against the background of the entire human species. A word already in use intuitively defines this view: *nobility*. Had dinosaurs grasped the concept they might have survived. They might have been us<sup>[19]</sup>”.

The representatives of naturalism refer in their considerations about morality to the so-called strong evaluation which constitutes a wider, questioned by them framework, which I will discuss in the next section.

<sup>[17]</sup>Wilson, E. O. (2004) *On Human Nature*. Harvard University Press, Harvard, p. 6.

<sup>[18]</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 196.

<sup>[19]</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 197.

## Hidden moral sources of naturalism

In *Sources of the Self* – one of the most important philosophical books of the second half of the twentieth century – Charles Taylor draws attention to the characteristic feature of contemporary naturalistic ethical conceptions, including utilitarianism, which consists in suppression of one's own moral sources which leads to the atrophy of spiritual life<sup>[20]</sup>.

ological needs, etc., can be considered first-order desires).

The naturalistic conception of morality rejects strong moral evaluation and references to ontology, at the same time accepting them as hidden assumptions on which naturalism is based, thus its research goes beyond the description of human behavior and tendencies. From a naturalistic point of view, moral reactions are understood as gut reactions which can be modified to a certain extent by the cold

Respecting someone else's life or being guided by someone else's good is not the result of physiological reactions, but rather the standards by which certain reactions can be judged and considered as appropriate.

Every ethical theory must, by definition, refer to a moral horizon that enables us to respond to good – that is, to define what is important and what is not important in our life, what to strive for and what to avoid, what is right and what is wrong (in other words, what makes sense in life). Strong evaluation enables us to be orientated in moral space, thanks to which we know who we are. This refers to what Harry Frankfurt calls the second-order desires (a desire to have a certain desire) in his extremely important text about free will and the concept of a person<sup>[21]</sup>. Thanks to them, self-reflection is possible; they have the ability to revise the first-order desires (hunger, physi-

calculation of reason. The willingness to help others is thus considered at the same level as the desire to ventilate a room where it becomes stuffy and unwillingness to do harm at the same level as feeling nauseous. The point, however, is that respecting someone else's life or being guided by someone else's good is not the result of physiological reactions, but rather the standards by which certain reactions can be judged and considered as appropriate. Avoiding harming others on the grounds of a naturalistic conception of morality is not only a physiological reaction, but also an (implicit) expression of beliefs regarding the subject of the reaction. The tendency to altruism is not only a tendency, but it is also a desirable tendency, i.e., subject to strong evaluation of evolutionary psychology. Similarly, compassion is not discussed by the aforementioned scholars as a pure inducement, but as what we should

<sup>[20]</sup>Taylor, Ch. Sources of the Self...

<sup>[21]</sup>Frankfurt, H. G. (1971) Freedom of the will and the concept of a person, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 68, p. 5–20.

feel in a particular situation. To find out what makes given reactions, inclinations or motives right or wrong, one has to refer to a set of qualitative distinctions, as Taylor points out, which constitute our moral horizon. The reactions discussed by naturalists ‘presuppose a moral consciousness, or at least some sense of strong evaluation’<sup>[22]</sup>. Naturalistic conceptions reject framework, questioning the importance of qualitative distinctions, but at the same time they cannot do without them, so they smuggle them as implicit assumptions of their theories. These distinctions are based on goods that naturalistic conceptions recognize a priori as valuable, such as: universal benevolence, the affirmation of ordinary life and cooperation, self-fulfillment, equality and freedom, instrumental reason, etc. Not coincidentally, utilitarianism seems to be an ethical theory most compatible with naturalism, because it is based on ideals that express these values. These ideals are inherited by utilitarianism from ethical doctrines with which it remains in open opposition, hence it does not try to openly articulate their meaning. These ideals are: 1) the ideal of impartiality (equality, rationality, universalism) and 2) the imperative of universal benevolence (altruism). It is worth adding here that the first of these ideals is guided by rational morality, and the second ideal is the basis of intuitive morality, yet the broadening of its scope depends on reason as can be read in Greene’s book discussed here.

## The ideal of impartiality

Taylor, in his ambitious synthesis of the thought horizons of the modern Western world, carries an impressive genealogy of

explicit and implicit moral sources on which modern identity is based. From Plato, through Saint Augustine to Descartes and Locke, the author follows the process of internalizing moral sources which is associated with the birth of radical reflexivity. The internalization of moral sources consists in the fact that one gradually discards the derivation of morality from sources external to man, such as the objective order of Nature, the authority of God or the authority of other people. To this end, the idea of noncommitted instrumental rationality arises which constitutes a detached point of view concerning morality, similar to the point of view of an uncommitted observer.

Impartiality implies self-disengagement as a condition for the legitimacy of the judgments and is an attempt to imitate exact sciences by the post-Enlightenment philosophy in which research neutrality and objectivity are required which is clearly visible especially in the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. According to the latter, the goal of philosophy is to overcome that which is individual in favour of abstract generalities, of being as such<sup>[23]</sup>. An impartial decision on the ground of morals can be characterized as being generally and publicly defensible and which may not be reasonably rejected by anyone<sup>[24]</sup>. According to John Rawls, the impartiality of judgments may be attained without recourse to the notion of truth, because it only refers to what reasonable and rational entities can together agree on striving to reach the so-called reflective equilibrium<sup>[25]</sup>. Such an ap-

<sup>23</sup>Hegel, G. W. F. (1991) *Science of Logic*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo.

<sup>24</sup>Scanlon, T. (2000) *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 6–7.

<sup>25</sup>Rawls, J. (1999) *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press,

<sup>22</sup>Taylor, Ch. *Sources of the Self...*, p. 333.

proach becomes the ideal of moral evaluation, a guarantee of equality and freedom, leading to proceduralism in ethics which goes hand in hand with rationalism and universalism. In this way modern ethical rationalism emerges which is most clearly presented by the utilitarian doctrine and the competitive deontology of Kant.

Rationalist procedural ethics based on the ideal of impartiality and instrumental rationality were criticized by many philosophers. One of the most passionate critics was Friedrich Nietzsche, who rejected the neutrality ideal as a condition for a fruitful pursuit of philosophy<sup>[26]</sup>. On the contrary, he argued that philosophical problems, especially those that concern our values, should be treated with the greatest possible personal approach – commitment and passion. He considered it redundant to strive for a generalized and abstract interpretation that every human being would have to consider right, because such reasoning is based on too many unjustified simplifications. First, on the simplification that human individuals can be reduced to some ideal human being (such as ‘man in general’) which are predetermined according to certain arbitrary criteria (e.g. rationality). Secondly, such a reasoning assumes that we can take into account the perspectives of others and distance ourselves from our own which Nietzsche believes is a false hope, because the perspectives of others can only be available to us in terms of what is similar in us. Infatuation with instrumental rationality contributed to naturalism’s adoption of the presumption that a human being can be described as the subject of objective scientific research which,

as Nietzsche pointed out, and following him – Taylor, is wrong, because it is impossible to describe the subject in isolation from the way in which this subject interprets its experiences and understands itself.

On the other hand, critics of the ideal of impartiality and instrumental rationalism in ethics were conducted by British empiricists, considering the key role of feelings and emotions, and not reason, in shaping attitudes and moral actions. This postulate was absorbed in an interesting way by naturalism, to which I will move on to in the next point.

## The imperative of universal benevolence

The birth of utilitarianism on the grounds of British empiricism should be considered against the background of social changes taking place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A great development of production and trade took place which favored the maximization of wealth by the bourgeoisie and the birth of capitalism. Social transformation was associated with the gradual transformation of consciousness and customs of the influential social class involved in these changes. With the strengthening of the bourgeoisie, the attitude of pragmatism, characteristic for tradesmen and traders, began to dominate, where utility, instrumental approach to the world, ownership, work, contract and exchange were the basic values<sup>[27]</sup>. The Prot-

Cambridge.

<sup>26</sup>On this topic, see Soniewicka, M. (2017) *After God. The Normative Power of the Will from the Nietzschean Perspective*, Peter Lang Edition, Frankfurt am Main.

<sup>27</sup>Hannah Arendt aptly diagnoses the links between utilitarian ideals of the measure of happiness and socio-economic determinants, noting that the ideal of utility permeates the society of craftsmen (this homo faber mentality makes everything perceived in terms of means and goals, that there occurs degradation of many goods through their instrumentalization), the ideal of comfort pervades the society of

estant religion had a significant influence on the development of middle-class ethics and the spirit of capitalism<sup>[28]</sup>. Bourgeoisie ethics breaks with the ancient ideals of contemplation (*vita contemplativa*) and public activity (*vita activa*) as the best ways to achieve a good life, replacing it with the affirmation of ordinary life, in which family life and work (and not asceticism or a social role) are to ensure self-fulfillment.

In Christian theological discussions of that pe-

world, it is good. Feelings and emotions which are part of human nature thus gain a special moral rank and acquire a normative character. It is assumed that natural human bent to love the good binds society, which becomes the basis for the ethics of universal benevolence. Assuming that everyone is striving for happiness, it does not follow that we should strive for happiness in general. In order to be able to recognize this utilitarian imperative, an additional assumption about the harmony of interests which is the result of this natural hu-

Naturalism therefore seems to be a powerful metanarrative which can be perfectly combined with utilitarianism only when it affects us through its hidden moral horizon. Yet, as soon as we realize this, we are forced to give up naturalism, at least in its reductionist version.

riod, voluntarism began to be rejected and the theory of reward and punishment was opposed to, replacing it with the theory of the natural tendencies of a human being to good. Initially, this theory proclaimed by the Cambridge Platonists appealed to external moral sources, i.e., to God which directs every person to good. A similar theory was taken over by deist concepts, assuming that Divine Providence guarantees the objective order of the world, of which the human nature is a part – and because it is part of the providential order of the

man inclination to good, which in turn results from God’s order of nature, must be accepted. It is in this way that the theory of moral sentiments is born (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume) which Adam Smith transplanted to the ground of capitalism, laying the foundations for modern liberal economy. Establishing the existence of a harmony of interests lies in the fact that a person, pursuing his or her own good, acts simultaneously for the benefit of the public good through the ‘invisible hand’, using the Smith metaphor, which reconciles their interests and leads to general well-being<sup>[29]</sup>.

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employees, and the ideal of exchange is dominating in market societies (Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

<sup>28</sup>Weber, M. (2013) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

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<sup>29</sup>This assumption, accepted by utilitarians, Hannah Arendt calls the ‘communist fiction’ of the conformity of the interests of society as a whole, promising universal prosperity and harmony (Arendt, H. *Human Condition*...).

The requirement to strive for universal justice and happiness which is the basis of a utilitarian ethics of benevolence, is a transformation of the Christian concept of love (*agape*). By detaching one’s neighbor’s love from metaphysical roots and by internalizing moral sources, utilitarianism began to understand the commitment to the common good in non-theistic categories, where the inclination to good became an innate predisposition to altruism and ceased to be seen as given from God. In other words, God’s grace has been replaced with evolutionary adaptations that enable us to meet the requirements of universal benevolence. In this way, a moral horizon that is consistent with utilitarianism was born – naturalism which places moral sources in ‘the depths of nature within and without’<sup>[30]</sup>. As Taylor points out, this doctrine turned out to be a more serviceable religion for a democratic age – a new rebellious worldview, being a constitutive element of the Western culture<sup>[31]</sup>.

Hidden moral sources of naturalistic conceptions of morality, including utilitarianism, were revealed by Nietzsche in the most vivid way<sup>[32]</sup>. He believed that happiness understood as prosperity, pleasure and comfort is not a universal idea at all but rather a reflection of the bourgeois preferences of English merchants who try to extend themselves to all humanity. He categorically rejected the herd perspective (including the perspective of species) in morality, considering that happiness is something purely individual which cannot be reduced to a common denomina-

tor, calculated, measured or even compared. He also believed that happiness is an internal state resulting from our predisposition to experiencing it, and not a goal to which one can strive<sup>[33]</sup>.

An important charge which Nietzsche formulated directly against the evolutionary psychology is that the research carried out within it is based on a priori assumptions (he called them superstitions) which narrowed their scopes and warped its results. The main superstition they start with is an a priori assumption that altruism, mercy and an selfless perspective have some value in themselves. According to Nietzsche, these assumptions are the result of Christian values being deeply rooted in our culture which these researchers consider as universal and given values, seeking their empirical confirmation:

‘When the English really believe that they ‘intuitively’ know all by themselves what is good and what is evil; and when, as a result, they think that they do not need Christianity to guarantee morality any more, this is itself just the result of the domination of the Christian value judgment and an expression of the *strength* and *depth* of this domination’<sup>[34]</sup>.

For these reasons, the German philosopher defines naturalistic humanism, including utilitarianism and liberalism, as a homeopathic version of Christianity. Nietzsche mocks re-

<sup>30</sup>Taylor, Ch. Sources of the Self..., p. 408.

<sup>31</sup>Ibidem, p. 409.

<sup>32</sup>See on this issue: Soniewicka, M. After God...

<sup>33</sup>Nicolai Hartmann wrote in a similar way, saying that happiness and love can happen to us when we pursue other goals, but they cannot be the object of aspiration themselves in: Hartmann, N. (2007) Ethics. Moral Phenomena, vol. I, Routledge, p. 149–150.

<sup>34</sup>Nietzsche, F. (2005) Twilight of the Idols, in: The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings, eds. Ridley, A., Norman, J. tran. Norman, J. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 194.

search which, based on the theory of evolution and natural selection, leads from the ‘Darwinian beast’ to the contemporary moral weakling who ‘no longer bites’, but is full of care and empathy, denies the self and is keen to cooperate<sup>[35]</sup>. The error committed by these scholars lies in what assume that the fact that they assume that what they want to prove – that there is a biological conditioning of non-egotistical moral feelings which are socially useful.

## Final remarks: the articulation of moral sources

Some naturalists, such as the aforementioned Edward O. Wilson are aware that the theory of evolution is a form of myth-creating metanarrative which is to replace the previous horizons, enabling self-understanding:

‘The core of scientist materialism is the evolutionary epic. Let me repeat its minimum claims: that the laws of the physical sciences are consistent with those of the biological and social sciences and can be linked in chains of causal explanation; that life and mind have a physical basis; that the world as we know it has evolved from earlier worlds obedient to the same laws; and that the visible universe today is everywhere subject to these materialist explanations. The epic can be indefinitely strengthen up and down the line, but its most sweeping assertions cannot be proved with finality. [...] the evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have. [...] the mythopoeic requirements of the mind must somehow be met by scientific materialism so

as to reinvest our superb energies<sup>[36]</sup>’.

Wilson sincerely believes in the Promethean spirit of science, recognizing the knowledge by which a human being can control the world and dominate over other species as the ‘destiny’ of humanity, hence he perceives scientific materialism as the best mythology to express his faith.

Taylor agrees with Wilson that the acceptance of reductionist naturalism requires a leap of faith which is allowed, in his opinion, by a vision of morality embedded in this worldview (one would not be able to live in accordance with the sole assumptions of reductionist naturalism). However, Taylor does not share Wilson’s enthusiasm in the matter of the possibility of a naturalistic worldview towards opening the innermost deposits of human energy. On the contrary, according to Taylor, the atrophy of spiritual sources on the grounds of reductive naturalism inhibits human development, preventing it from articulating and understanding its moral horizon. According to the Canadian philosopher, the effective articulation of moral sources releases their strength, and their repression causes their gradual disappearance as a result of cutting off access to them. Every moral horizon requires the adoption of ontology. Naturalistic ontology to which utilitarianism refers, implies ontological monism, consisting in the reduction of all spiritual phenomena to the physical world. For these reasons, Jürgen Habermas acknowledges that the image of the world offered by reductionist naturalism is not at all science but bad metaphysics<sup>[37]</sup>. A good ontology is

<sup>35</sup>Nietzsche, F. (2007) *On The Genealogy of Morality*, ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, tran. C. Diethe. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>36</sup>Wilson, E. O. *On Human Nature*, p. 201.

<sup>37</sup>Habermas, J. (2008) *Between Naturalism and Religion*. Polity Press, Cambridge

such an ontology that offers the best possible interpretation for our self-understanding. Our understanding of ourselves is crucial for morality, because it influences what and how we experience, and how we behave. Evolutionary naturalism provides an explanation of natural cognitive abilities and moral powers which at the same time undermine their credibility. Starting from the assumptions of evolutionary naturalism, we cannot claim that we have privileged cognitive access to the world, but only the access that best serves our survival. We cannot assume that objective truth, let alone an objective good, is more conducive to survival than illusion or superstition. From the point of view of evolutionary naturalism, therefore, we should not take seriously the content of any beliefs, including those regarding the scientific image of the world on which evolutionary naturalism is based which was noticed not only by Nietzsche, but also by many contemporary philosophers<sup>[38]</sup>. Self-understanding on the ground of naturalism thus becomes a delusion<sup>[39]</sup>.

Utilitarianism, supported by reductionist naturalism, has been formulated in opposition to traditional ethical doctrines having

their sources in metaphysics. Its representatives need both a reductionist ontology which serves to reject religion and metaphysics, as well as a strong moral foundation which they accept in isolation from its sources. The problem is that these two elements are difficult to reconcile with each other, as Taylor points out, they are even mutually exclusive<sup>[40]</sup>. A philosophy which needs opponents to express its own moral sources, as Taylor points out, is parasitic and cannot survive as an independent way of thinking<sup>[41]</sup>. The strength of this doctrine lies in the fact that it appeals to valuations (values of rationality, pursuit of happiness and universal benevolence) deeply rooted in contemporary culture and our self-interpretation, although it officially rejects their sources. Speaking from a moral position which it cannot acknowledge and based on moral insights which it does not give a justified place to, it reveals its great weakness and self-destructive tendencies.

Naturalism therefore seems to be a powerful metanarrative which can be perfectly combined with utilitarianism only when it affects us through its hidden moral horizon. Yet, as soon as we realize this, we are forced to give up naturalism, at least in its reductionist version<sup>[42]</sup>.

<sup>38</sup>In particular, it is worth paying attention to the extremely clear and convincing arguments of Nagel and Plantinga: Nagel, T. (2012) *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Plantinga, A. (2011) *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>39</sup>Spaemann, R. *Osoby...*, p. 65.

<sup>40</sup>Taylor, Ch. *Sources of the Self...*, p. 336.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 339–340.

<sup>42</sup>On the limitations of naturalism, not only in the field of morality, see *Naturalism in: Question*, eds. de Caro, M., Macarthur, D., (2004) Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, London.



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